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ABSTRACT

A rich artistic tradition developed in Mexico hundreds of years prior to the arrival of the Spanish. The indigenous people of Mexico created beautiful works of art that reflected their religious beliefs. Then the Spanish Conquest and colonization during the 1500s introduced Spanish beliefs and traditions to the region. This curriculum unit explores the new artistic traditions that evolved with the convergence of cultures as reflected in art, architecture, music, cuisine, and many aspects of daily "Mestizo" life today. The lessons can be taught as a single unit, or sections can be used when teaching the history of Mexico in a chronological manner. Lessons in the unit rely on the use of photographs and postcards that have been made into color overhead transparencies, as well as slides. The unit lists four goals for students to achieve and suggests class activities and the format for questioning students about the material can vary from day to day. Geared for students in grades 9 or 10, the unit begins with the pre-Columbian period, proceeds through the colonial period, and concludes with 20th century art. Contains extensive illustrations. (BT)

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Converging Cultures:
A Fusion of Spanish and Indigenous Artistic Traditions

by

Jeannette Balantic
1999 Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad Program
Mexico Seminar

SO 031 433

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Converging Cultures:
A Fusion of Spanish and Indigenous Artistic Traditions

Background notes:

A rich artistic tradition developed in Mexico hundreds of years prior to the arrival of the Spanish. The indigenous people created beautiful works of art that reflected their religious beliefs and used available resources. The Spanish Conquest and colonization during the 1500s introduced Spanish beliefs and traditions to the region. As a result, a new artistic tradition emerged as each tried to preserve its identity. The fusion of the two cultures produced a dynamic artistic tradition. The convergence of cultures is reflected in art, architecture, music, cuisine and many aspects of daily Mestizo life today. This unit seeks to explore the new traditions that evolved.

The lessons can be taught as a single unit or pieces can be used when teaching the history of Mexico in a chronological manner. The lesson relies on the use of photographs and postcards, that I have made into color overhead transparencies, and slides from the trip. I have reproduced a number of them (some in color, some black and white) for this unit. I have included a brief bibliography of books that include similar works.

Students can be given all the handouts at one time with questions typed out for each piece, they can look at the images on the overhead and questions can be asked orally - the format can vary from day to day.

Objectives: Students will

- identify and describe symbols used in Mexican art
- discuss the use of symbols, patterns, materials to express religious and secular beliefs of a powerful, complex culture
- analyze works of art and architecture in order to gain insight into Pre-Columbian, colonial and twentieth century Mexican history
- describe the social, political, or religious function of artistic images

The Pre-Columbian Period

Introduction: List the following animals on the board: jaguar, eagle, snake, butterfly. Students should describe characteristics of each.
What might each be used to symbolize. What unusual, powerful or magical characteristics does each animal have that would make it an appropriate symbol for a supernatural being or ruler of this world? Discuss the use of symbols in American culture (names of cars, sports teams, etc.)

Focus: Over the next few days we will examine works of art from Mexico to develop an understanding of the history of the region.

Developmental:

Distribute handout(s) to students. (Color slides and/or postcards are available from many museum and can be used for this lesson.)

Eagle pendant and the figure pendant

Students should:

- identify the animal forms in each and speculate what each represents (they should know that the eagle symbolizes the sun, and all of the animals are powerful and could pose a threat to human beings)
- discuss the similarities and differences of each piece (if not using color slides or pictures, be sure students read the tag to identify that each is made of gold)
- describe the precious materials used and why they were so precious
- speculate as to who might have owned the pieces?. Why do you think that?
- hypothesize how the Spanish conquistadors might have reacted to seeing local rulers wearing such pendants (treasures in the 'New World').
- explain how the discovery of the gold may have influenced the history of Pre-Columbian cultures.
- explain where these pieces that are in museums today might have been discovered (in tombs, undiscovered or unknown to the Spanish)
- explain what these objects reflect about Aztec culture and history

Aztec stone figures

Students should:

- compare the figures - how are they similar? different?
- identify what they are made of
- tell students the actual size of each (18 inches tall) compare the actual size to something they are familiar with
- describe the dress and ornamentation
- describe the proportions of the human forms - are certain aspects enlarged or altered? Why might the sculptor have done this?

- hypothesize about how they should be able to tell the figures are female (kneeling, submissive position)
- explain how the two female figures are different? similar?
- [both are kneeling - submissive pose
- both are goddesses and would be found in a regional shrine.]
- Why is one more frightening than the other? How is this conveyed?

Background - Cihuateotl is the goddess of women who died in childbirth. The Aztecs believed the spirits of these women would return at certain times of the year to kidnap little children. They built shrines to the goddesses o prevent this from happening.

What insights can one acquire about the Aztecs by examining the sculptures? (talented, polytheistic, produced art as a functional part of their society etc.)

Mayan Vase

Students should:

- describe the materials it is made from and the techniques that were used (discuss coil vs. wheel methods of pottery)
- explain the use of such vases or pots (simple ones used every day, ornate vessels used for religious purposes)
- describe the scenes that are present on the image - how are people dressed, what are they doing, what symbols are present? (discuss the narrative technique)
- explain the insights that can be gained from studying the works

When the Spanish arrived how might they have responded to the representation of gods and goddesses? (want to destroy them in order to enable Christianity to be spread.) How might they have responded to the variety of artistic forms present?

Application: Write a letter from the perspective of a Spanish conquistador or missionary to someone in Spain describing what you have encountered in the New World. (The following day you could use a primary source document that gives the actual Spanish reaction i.e. Cortes.)

Create a pendant or statue that you might use for protection - write a 'museum card or tag' that explains the function, symbolism, materials, etc. of your creation.

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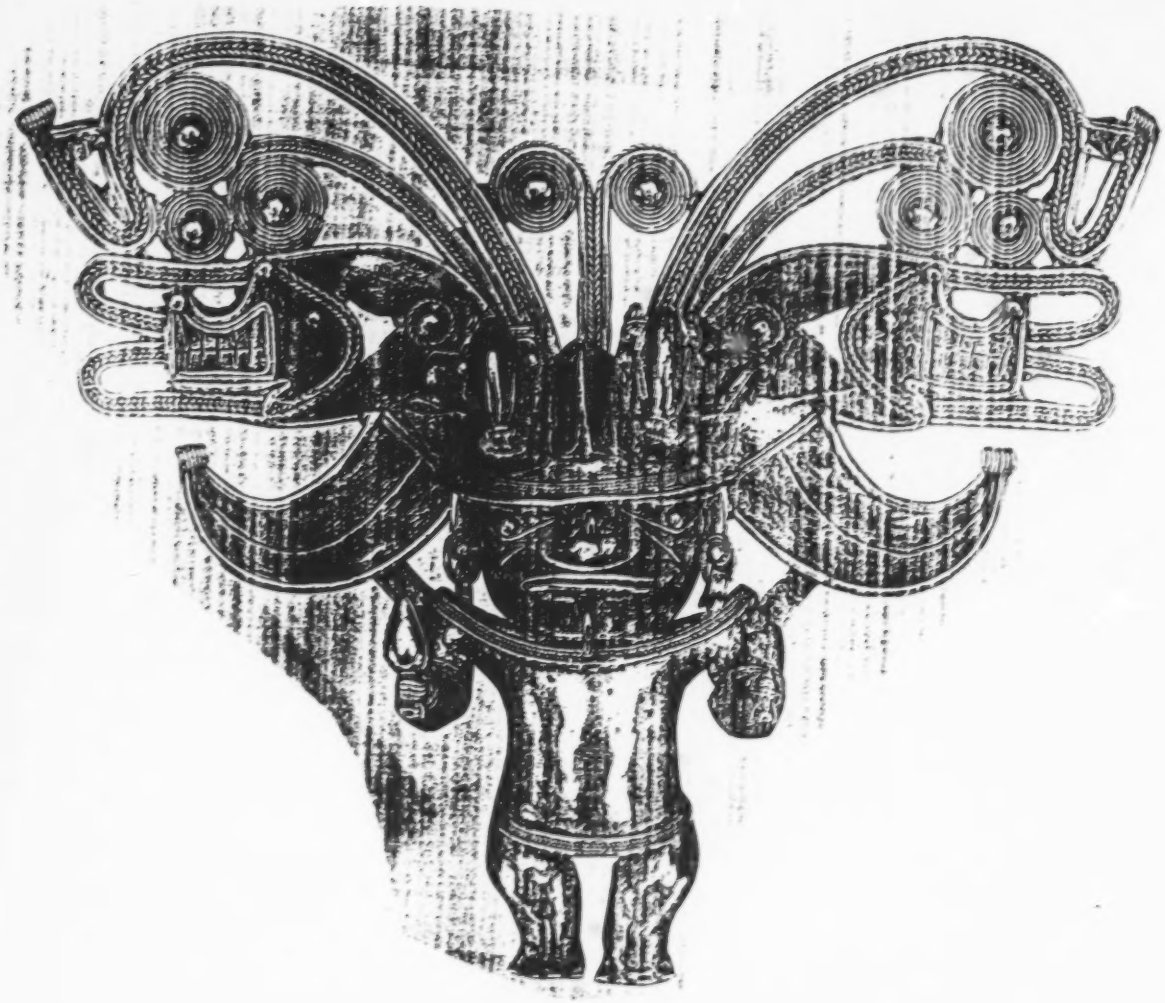
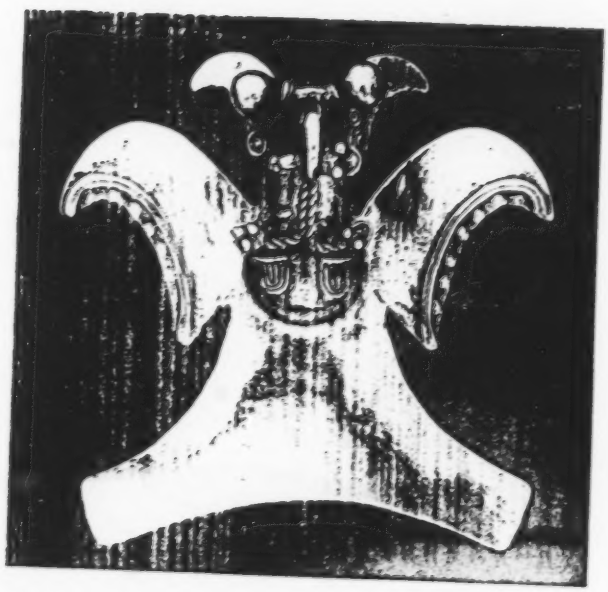
Pre-Columbian Period





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The Colonial Period

Introduction: Brainstorm the effects of Spanish rule in Mexico. (A number of things should emerge for this lesson, be sure to elicit - conversion to Christianity, the blending of bloodlines and the social hierarchy)

Focus: Today we will examine the art of the Colonial time period. We will be focusing on the impact of Spanish rule on the art and architecture of Mexico. We will also be looking for any insights the art and architecture might give us about the time period.

Developmental: Students need to be reminded that the conversion of indigenous people to Christianity included not just changing their religious beliefs, but also, among many other things, the introduction of new houses of worship and religious images.

Painted Manuscript Students should:

- Describe what they see happening in the manuscript (Pass out handout with Aztec date names to help them as they try to make meaning of the image)
- Hypothesize as to why this is in the colonial segment of the lesson. (Pre-colonial manuscripts were all destroyed by the conquistadors as a way to impose the new viceregal order. By the middle of the 1500s however, the form is relied on as a way of administering or governing the territory - the more they new about Aztec tradition the easier it would be to conquer it. Information was conveyed in text and picture - therefore it was a way of communicating with an illiterate audience.)
- Explain the clues in the manuscript that indicate that it was produced during the colonial period and therefore a fusion of the two cultures. ((Images preserve pre-Hispanic style and iconography with informative Spanish texts to explain the images to the viewer. Not completed on bark paper, rather imported paper.)

Porteria arches and column base. Students should:

- Describe elements of the architecture that are European and elements that are indigenous.
- Discuss the labor force used in the construction of the churches.
- Discuss the impact of using indigenous labor. (The impact on the form and design - fusion of pre-Hispanic and European forms.)
- Discuss why the Spanish wanted to construct churches in the 'new world', where the churches were built, and why they were so large.

Column base.

- Again, discuss the indigenous and European influences

- Discuss the god Tlaltecuhtli (lord of the earth and the devourer of the dead. - a student could research this prior to the lesson.)
- [the image is on the bottom of the column - in Aztec belief, the god generally was not visible. An indigenous worker therefore, chose it for the base of a column that would be use for a church. The friars who commissioned the building were happy because the relief was not visible, and the worker had the feeling that he had preserved some of his beliefs.]

Images of Chapel

- Describe what you see.
- How does the image reflect a fusion of cultures? (Aside from the obvious Catholic church, call students attention to the architectural details that are very indigenous in design, also the use of an open chapel.)
- Speculate as to why the Spanish would build open and outdoor chapels. (In the Aztec culture people did not enter churches, they were afraid to enter the new Catholic churches. The Spanish could also use the outdoor chapel as a way of baptizing large numbers of native peoples)

Images of Cross

- Compare the two crosses - describe the similarities and differences
- How do these images reflect a fusion of cultures? (Symbols associated with the passion of Christ did not originate in New Spain but did take on a distinct imagery - depiction of Virgin the proportion evident in the relief. Rooster, crown, nails, ladder, etc. - what do they represent?)
- Where would a cross like this be found? (In the courtyard of a church.)
- Why would the symbols and imagery be on the cross? (Children were often instructed about Christianity as they sat around the cross, again the pictorial language communicates a lot of information to the textually illiterate.) This might also be a good time to introduce the Virgin of Guadeloupe to your students. You can discuss the political ramifications of the image of the Virgin and the reasons for the popularity of the image

Christ with rope around his neck and Crucifix

- Describe what you see.
- Where does the goriness originate?
- Why would converted indigenous people adopt this genre? (oppressed Indians relate to the suffering of Christ, connected to their old gods and sacrifice.)
- Discuss other reasons why Mexican would adopt images similar to this. (The statues replaced their traditional devotional pieces.)

Miguel Cabrera, Depiction of Racial Mixtures

Students should:

- Describe what the paintings show.
- For each picture identify the Spanish elements and the Mexican elements.
- Describe the background of the people in the pictures - How do you know?
- What are the occupations of the people?
- How does the artist convey information about the people?
- Why would there be paintings devoted to the theme of castas?
- (reflects the racial mixing that took place in Mexico but also, reinforces the strict social structure.)

Talavera Pottery - Students should:

- Describe the pattern they see represented on each piece (geometric and a scene that goes around the vase)
- If they didn't know where the pieces were from, where might they assume they came from? Why? (maybe China or the Middle East because of the colors and patterns used on each piece. This is a chance to infuse some history i.e. the role of Muslims in Spain and diffusion that resulted, Spanish trade and contact with the Philippines that may have led to the Asian influence kids may have commented on.)
- Explain any similarities to other Mexican works they might have seen (Mayan pottery - scenes depicted)
- Describe the technique that might have been used to make each piece (the wheel was introduced by the Spanish - fusion of techniques and styles).

How do these pieces of art reflect the impact of colonial rule in Mexico?

Application: In pairs, students should select another piece of Mexican art from the colonial period that reflects the theme of fusion between the two cultures. They must write an analysis of the work.

COLONIAL

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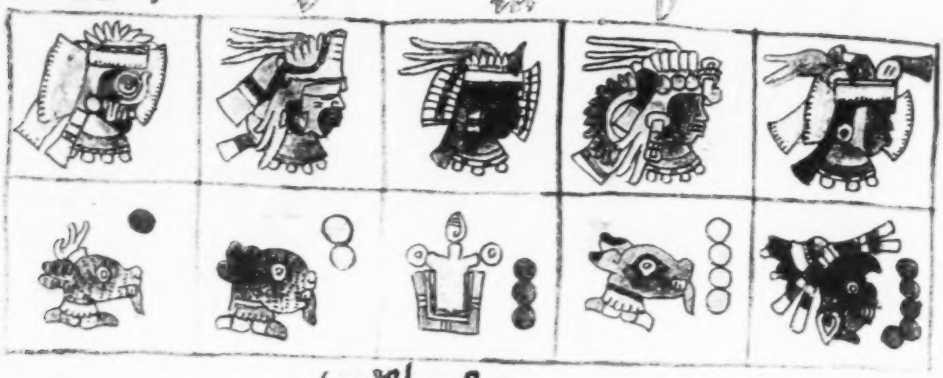

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AZTEC DATE NAMES

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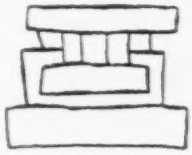
Cipactli

2, 22
Wind
Ehecatl



3, 23
House
Calli

4, 24
Lizard
Cuetzpalin

5, 25
Snake
Coatl

6, 26
Death
Miquiztli

7, 27
Deer
Mazatl

8, 28
Rabbit
Tochtli

9, 29
Water
Atl

10, 30
Dog
Itzcuintli

11, 31
Monkey
Ozomatli

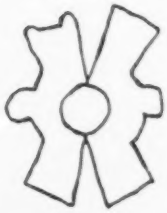
12
Grass
Malinalli

13
Cane
Acatl

14
Tiger
Ocelotl

15.
Eagle
Quauhtli

16
King-vulture
Cozcaquahtli



17
Motion
Olin

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Flint
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Rain
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Colonial

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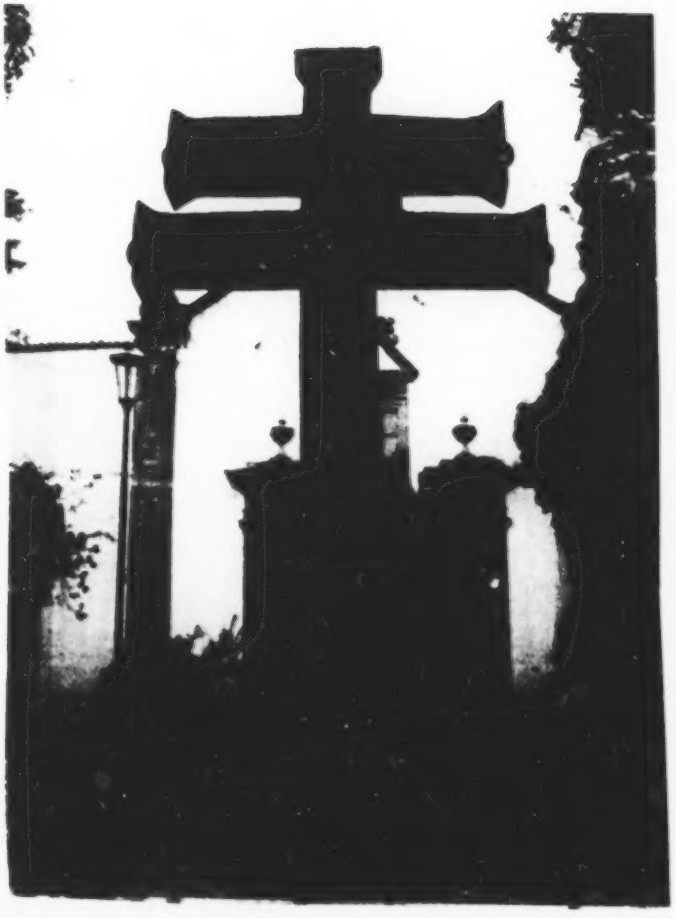
COLONIAL

13

COLONIAL



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colonial

18

Twentieth Century Art

Introduction: If you were going to try to explain American history to someone what are the key events and people you would include. List them. Try to think of images or symbols that would be used to represent the events and people listed.

Focus: Today we will examine a few twentieth century works of art by Mexican artists to help us understand the Mexican perspective on recent developments in the region. (This lesson should be done after students have studied contemporary Mexican history.)

Developmental:

Diego Rivera's work reflects of fusion of content and style as it represents historical events and the daily lives of people. In addition, is work, the murals in particular are a great way to teach young people about Mexican history and the literal converging of cultures.

Below are some possible questions to ask students as they look at each of the works

Flower Carrier

- Describe what is happening in the picture.
- Who are the subjects? What is their background?
- How does Rivera feel about his subject? What about the painting or his technique lead you to that conclusion?
- Where might the person be carrying flowers to? [Day of the Dead celebration]
- How does Rivera feel about the work being done?

"El Arribo de Hernan Cortes 1519 (The Arrival of Hernan Cortes 1519) (The literal converging of cultures is represented here, there are many other murals that could be used to teach students about Mexican history via art.)

- Describe what is happening in this segment of the mural - break the image down into different sections for analysis. (Arrival of ?Cortes in Veracruz, religious services, domesticated animals, Exchange of money, the work being done.
- Call the students attention to the woman carrying a child in the foreground - what do they notice about the women and child? (She is an Indian, the child has blue eyes - she was the mistress of Cortes and that is the child they had together - the ultimate fusion of cultures and can be seen on the faces, not literally the eyes of many Mestizos in Mexico today.)
- What message might Rivera be trying to convey with the painting?

- How does this painting be reflect earlier events in Mexican history?
- How is this painting similar to the others by Rivera?
- Are there any generalizations you can make about the Rivera pieces you have looked at? [celebration of the everyday lives of the people of Mexico, indigenous people are his subjects, dignified representation of peoples lives, Mexican identity and nationalism etc.]

Although Rivera celebrates the daily life of Mexican people, how might he also be a byproduct of the fusion of the two cultures and their combined histories? How does history influence what he paints?

Application: Assign students another Mexican muralist. Students should do research on the muralist and create a class presentation that explains the historical themes present in the artist's work.

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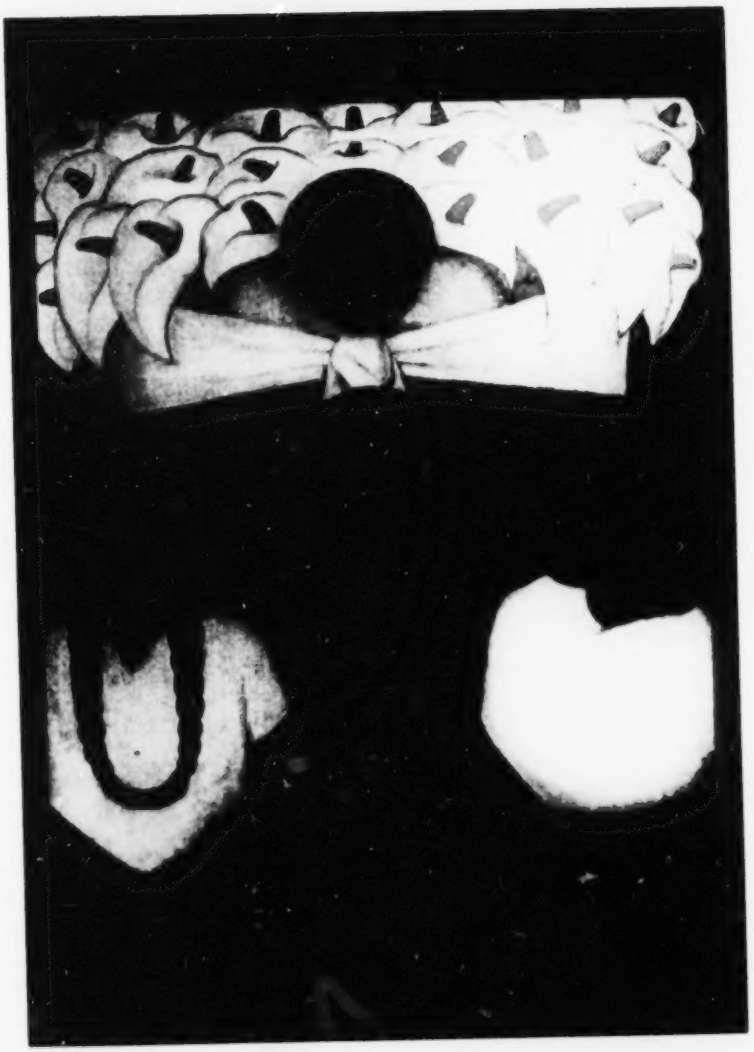
20th Century



20th Century

"EL ARRIBO DE HERNAN CORTES 1519"

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Class Activities

(Although the unit is geared for 9th or 10th grade students, many of the activities below can be done with students of all ages)

Many people collect and buy handicrafts in Mexico today. They often reflect centuries old practices and can give us insight into Mexican culture and crafts today. A discussion about labor, economics and exploitation would be appropriate when discussing this issue. Students can make a number of 'Mexican-like' handicrafts in class - of course a model always makes any art project easier to complete.

Amate Painting Brightly painted scenes don on amate bark. These have been painted in Mexico since ancient times. Now decorative (for westerners), they were once used to record historical information.

Students can recreate these using brown paper bags that have been crumbled up to achieve the amate texture. Draw images on the bag that follow the traditional Mexican patterns (birds, animals, flowers) and colors (bright).

Nearikas Yarn paintings often done by Huichol people.

Students can create these using a cardboard background, drawing their images, and gluing brightly colored yarn onto the cardboard to make their design. This can be a bit messy, because although the 'real' nearikas are done by pressing the yarn into warm wax, students complete this project with glue. A small cardboard background is recommended, as it takes a while to complete this project.

Talavera Tiles Painted ceramic tiles.

These can be completed with self-hardening (no bake clay) or with the help of an art teacher regular clay that gets fired. Students cut out 6-10 clay tiles (or you can design one pattern for the entire class) fire the tile, and paint 'Talavera-like" designs on the tiles. They can be assembled for a wall display in your school.

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